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15 March 2019

Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Pilson, Anna (2019) 'Participation to emancipation to inclusion? developing an active participatory research model with children with a visual impairment to promote educational inclusion, through improving teacher training provision on SEND.', in *Imagining Better Education: Conference Proceedings 2018*. Durham, England: Durham University, School of Education, pp. 164-182. *Imagining Better Education*.

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Participation to Emancipation to Inclusion? Developing an active participatory research model with children with a visual impairment to promote educational inclusion, through improving teacher training provision on SEND.

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Participation to Emancipation to Inclusion? Developing an active participatory research model with children with a visual impairment to promote educational inclusion, via improving teacher training provision on SEND.

This article outlines a proposed empirical study exploring the development of an innovative, participatory research methodology, related to the ‘Children-as-Researchers’ model (Kellett, 2005; Fielding, 2004). Its key aim is to conduct research *with* a cohort of pupils with a visual impairment (hereafter VI), who will develop research skills and subsequently plan, create, deliver and evaluate a resource to promote inclusive practice amongst Initial Teacher Training (ITT) students. This could develop participants’ self-monitoring skills (Koenig and Holbrook, 2009), which would result in self-empowerment (Davis and Watson, 2000). The project concurrently aims to enhance ITT SEND training provision, meeting Ofsted’s (2008) recommendation that ITT providers offer opportunities for students to develop *specific* knowledge about particular diagnostic categories of SEND (later defined by the DfE’s 2015 updated SEN Code of Practice as 4 broad areas of need).

Keywords: visual impairment; participatory action research; teacher training; inclusion, emancipation.

Background and Rationale

The 2014 Children’s and Families Act represented the most wholesale change of SEND policy in 30 years, legislating a commitment to explicitly person-centred support processes and enshrining in policy children’s right to “have a real say in what help they get” (DfE, 2014, p. 26). Yet in 2017, Ofsted still found pupils with SEND to be having a poorer educational experience than their peers. This project hypothesises that a key reason for this is that the right to participation and voice for pupils with SEND is not translating at grass-roots educational level. As Webster and Blatchford (2017, pp. 19-

20) state - “following the overhaul of the SEND system, we still do not know what the provision set out in a Statement looks like to the...pupils on the receiving end”.

The proposed research provides an original, timely contribution to the field of educational inclusion research. It stems from a supposition that while educators and policy-makers are committed to advocating *for* pupils with SEND, their actions may unwittingly disempower them. It is therefore crucial to develop pupil voice as a means of underpinning pupils with SEND’s rights to inclusion, as “listening to students can counter discriminatory and exclusionary tendencies in education” (Cook-Sather, 2006, p. 368). This research adopts a Vygotskian (1978) socio-cultural perspective in viewing learning as a social process, positing that people learn directly from interaction with each other (Bandura, 1977). It seeks to facilitate participatory research, and to consider meanings and good practice pertinent to those pupils involved. The term ‘participation’ is multi-layered in its definition (Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001, Sinclair, 2004). In its simplest construct it can simply mean taking part, being present, being involved or consulted (Franklin and Sloper, 2006). This project, however, aims to invoke the opposite end of the spectrum, bringing about a transfer of power to participants (Boyden and Ennew, 1997), so that their views drive decision-making and direction.

Additionally, it is “still relatively rare for children to initiate and drive a research project of their own choosing” (Kellett, 2006, p.3), and even more so for children with disabilities to be involved (Franklin and Sloper, 2006). Yet “the ability to collaborate on both a small-and large-scale is becoming one of the core requisites of postmodern society” (Fullan, 1993, p.5). While the Children-as-Researchers model has been used successfully with children with SEND (VIPER Project, 2012) and pupils with Profound and Multiple Learning Difficulties (Open University, 2016), there is a paucity of existing research which specifically involves pupils with VI as knowledge producers rather than subjects (Whitburn, 2014). This intimates that their experience and

knowledge remains largely unknown and “perhaps subjugated” (Genat, 2009, p. 105), therefore emphasising the potential of the proposed project to enhance knowledge in this area of disability studies.

Objectives

Its objectives bridge two clearly identified areas for development in inclusive education:

- (1) *Fostering active participation and empowerment of pupils with VI.* As participatory research, it will generate (rather than ‘extract’) knowledge from participants (Veale, 2005). This will enable pupils (through ‘deep’ levels of participation) to circumvent their traditionally passive research positions and gain ownership of the direction of the project (O’Kane, 2000), achieving a collegiate state of mutual learning (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). With an underpinning adherence to an emancipatory research ethos (Oliver, 1992), this project aims to support pupil-participants in becoming change agents (Bragg and Fielding, 2005), effecting a tangible impact on inclusive educational practice and laying the foundations for intrapersonal empowerment (Barnes, 1992; Veale, 2005; Barnes and Sheldon, 2007). Therefore, it meets the ESRC’s Delivery Plan 2016-2020 objective of contributing to the ‘mental health and wellbeing’ of participants, in terms of its personally transformative potential (Freire, 1990).

(2) *Creating workable strategies to improve SEND training in ITT provision.* The SEND reforms stemming from the 2014 Children and Families Act led to the government commissioning the Carter Review into ITT (2015). This report highlighted the disparate quality of provision of SEND training for student teachers, finding that it is often treated as an “optional extra...[rather than] a priority” in course content (Carter, 2015, p. 34). This conclusion was supported by the 2017 SENSE report on ITT, which stated that “a concerted, system-wide effort to improve the confidence and competence of teachers to teach pupils with SEND seems both necessary and overdue” (Webster and Blatchford, 2017, p. 7). Therefore, it seems critical to furnish this field with active, practical research. Mintz et al (2015) suggest that ITT providers should improve student teachers’ preparedness for their careers by helping them develop practical strategies to support theoretical knowledge of SEND (pp.79-80), including holding workshops examining disability (p.79) and providing opportunities to work closely with groups of children with SEND (p. 71). This project’s unique positioning of pupil-participants as “pedagogical consultants” (Cook-Sather, 2011, p. 41) to the ITT students meets all of the above recommendations, highlighting its potential to positively impact upon ITT SEND training provision.

The Research

Ethos:

At the heart of its approach, this research supports McLinden and McCall’s (2002) recommendation that children with VI should be encouraged to become active constructors of their own understanding, rather than passive recipients. This is underpinned by an adherence to an emancipatory research ethos (Oliver, 1992), which

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puts disabled people in control of the research process, in order to facilitate their empowerment or emancipation (Barnes, 1992). In this study's exploration of 'emancipation' it adheres to the belief that disability is a social construct and that commitment to an egalitarian methodology, avoiding didacticism, will remove any sense of oppression for participants (Barnes and Sheldon, 2007).

Collaboration:

When adopting an emancipatory research ethos it is critical to attempt to invoke change as an outcome (Oliver, 1992); thus it is important to disseminate findings within the community involved (Davis, 2009). To this end, this research benefits from a collaborative partnership with the Royal National Institute for the Blind, which entails the development of a reciprocal knowledge transfer partnership. Additionally, the project is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council.

Methodology:

The research will have 3 phases in which both objectives are met concurrently:

Phase 1: Establishing theoretical and practical underpinnings

A thematic literature review will identify definitions of pupil participation, potential barriers and good practice (e.g. Hart, 1992; Shier, 2001; Sinclair, 2004; Bragg and Fielding, 2005), underpinned by a consideration of impact of Visual Impairment on participation (e.g. Kekelis and Zellsacks, 2001; McLinden and McCall, 2002; Roe, 2008). A typology of effective participation will be produced, which will inform the creation of a diamond ranking resource (Woolner, Clark, Hall, Tiplady, Thomas and Wall, 2010; Towler, Woolner and Wall, 2011) and a Q Sort (Stephenson, 1935) to be used as formative and summative evaluation tools in the introductory and follow-up focus group sessions (outlined in Phases 2 and 3 below).

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A systematic review of the development of SEND ITT training provision in England post-1978 Warnock Report will provide a contextual discourse. Preliminary search criteria are taken from the 2010 European Agency for Development in Special Needs Education's International Literature Review. These were selected as a guiding (but not fixed) framework due to the breadth and robustness of that study, and the fact that, like this research, it is grounded in a focus on teacher training strategies that facilitate inclusion. Policy (e.g. specific DfEE/DfE publications dated 1998-2016) and guidance literature (e.g. Carter, 2015; Webster and Blatchford, 2017) will be studied to consider good ITT practice and areas for improvement.

Phase 2: Children as Researchers

Following the identification of a cohort of pupil-participants, an initial focus group will be conducted to build trust and common understanding (Krishnaswamy, 2004), and to introduce social-based learning in a structured way - a recommended approach for working with children with a VI (Roe, 2008). A group diamond ranking task will establish baseline understanding of meanings of participation and effective participatory practice. The diamond ranking headings will subsequently form the basis of an individual Q Sort task, which will also provide a semi-structured discussion forum. This activity will be held to overcome group dynamic power issues (Marshall and Rossman, 2006). Q Methodology has been selected as it allows subjectivity to be 'measured', allowing "an individual to represent his or her vantage point for purposes of...[considering] data in terms of the individual's whole pattern of responses, a self-reference" (Coogan and Herrington, 2011). Both tasks will be revisited in Phase 3 to determine whether subjective perspectives have changed through participation in the project.

Upon completion of this process, an adjusted Children-as-Researchers model will be used to train pupil-participants in research methods, using Kellett's (2005b) model as a guiding framework but refining to suit the access requirements of pupils and to overcome gatekeeper issues (Homan, 2002), notably time constraints. This design will be informed by an examination of existing good practice (including Fielding, 2001b, 2004; Kellett, 2005, 2006; Davis, 2009; Cook-Sather 2002, 2006, 2011; The VIPER project, 2012; The Open University, 2016). The group will subsequently design and create an educational tool/resource collaboratively, to train student teachers in promoting inclusive practice, evaluating its perceived efficacy via self-determined criteria. This emphasises the innovative nature of this project, as "outcome measures defined by young people are still rare" (Franklin and Sloper, 2006, p. 16).

Phase 3: Evaluating Outcomes

An exploration of the self-reported outcomes of pupil-participation in the project will be undertaken, through repetition of audio-recorded and data transcribed focus groups and individual Q sort tasks. Key interactional moments or epiphanies (Denzin, 1989, p. 15) in the final focus groups may lead to identification of shared experiences, which could be considered as representative of communal outcomes of participation in the project. Consequently, there would be, there is potential to create categories of analysis (Genat, 2009) as a means of drawing conclusions. Any emergent coding will be referred back to participants for feedback before and after their application to the data in a member-checking process (McMillan & Wergin, 2002, p. 122), triangulating data and ensuring respondent validity (Reason and Rowan, 1981). Indeed, participatory research *must* be supported by continuous data collection from individual interviews and focus groups to retain its viability (Niewenhuys, 1996) and ensure the emic voice is heard (Genat, 2009).

Finally, reflection on the potential of the participatory research model developed herein as a means for improving ITT SEND training provision will occur. As a pilot scheme trialling a model of pupil-led training for trainee practitioners, this project aims to invoke bifurcating yet complimentary outcomes: First, addressing the clear deficiency of pupil voice input into ITT. Second, simultaneously affording student teachers the opportunity to build evidence towards meeting Teachers' Standard 5: possessing a clear understanding of the needs of all pupils (DfE, 2011). Dependent on the nature of the resource produced by pupil-participants, there are opportunities to involve all students, or a smaller cohort who can act as 'SEND Champions' (Lamb, 2009; Mintz et al, 2015), and cascade knowledge to peers. Reflection will be achieved via student teachers completing pre- and post-participation questionnaires, of which the content is based on the sub-standards of Teachers' Standard 5. For example, to baseline and then assess whether the project has facilitated participants becoming more secure in identifying factors that inhibit learning and developing strategies for overcoming them. This method will be designed to include both closed Likert-type questions and open-ended questions, garnering supplementary rich data and gauge the perceived impact of the pupil-led training on their practice/confidence.

Outcomes

This research may have multi-faceted outcomes. It aims to cultivate in its participants transferable research skills that can be used in different curricular (as well as real-life) contexts, and it may also promote development of intra-personal skills that support social inclusion. It is acknowledged that these outcomes are dependent variables - as Aviles et al (2006) attest, improving social emotional development will have a positive impact on self-esteem, academic progress and attainment. In addition to improving teacher preparedness for teaching pupils with SEND, participation may also have wider-

reaching practical implications for their practice - as the Carter Review (2015, p. 34) notes, “good teaching for SEND is good teaching for all children”.

Acknowledgements: The author wishes to thank ESRC and NINE DTP for awarding funding for this research to take place; RNIB for acting as a collaborative partner, and in particular, Puja Joshi and Kate Flynn of the RNIB research team; Dr Rosie Ridgway, Professor Liz Todd and Dr Pamela Woolner for agreeing to act as supervisors to this project and their support so far; Rory Cobb and Sue Keil of VIEW and Dr Gail Bailey for their guidance and advice throughout the preliminary research process.

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